

3.0 SPECIFIC PLAN ISSUES

3.1 Citizens Advisory Task Force Effort

The Governmental Affairs Committee of the City Council appointed a Citizen Advisory Task Force, representing property owners on University Avenue, and a Staff Advisory Committee to review and advise with regard to efforts related to implementing the preferred strategies and vision for University Avenue.

The role of the Citizen Task Force, in particular, was to provide guidance during the initial stages of the planning process to:

- ! identify University Avenue related concerns
- ! define a future vision for University Avenue
- ! suggest potential implementation strategies needed to realize this vision.

The Citizen Task Force met twice during the planning process as well as in a series of subcommittee meetings.

3.2 Issues Identified

The following is a summary of major concerns emerging from the Task Force meetings and a subsequent workshop briefing to the City Council and Redevelopment Agency:

3.2.1 Focus of University Avenue as a Traffic Carrier

University Avenue should continue to be the major thoroughfare connecting downtown and UCR and should serve the local businesses along its length. Expanding the roadway to facilitate cut-through traffic from the freeways is not desirable.

The Circulation Element of the current General Plan calls for the widening of University Avenue from four to six lanes along its entire length through the study area and the streetscape plan prepared previously indicated widening to eight lanes at some intersections. This is not consistent with the desire of the task force to focus on University Avenue as a pedestrian friendly street.

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This vision of a four-lane street was a key theme of the University Avenue Strategic Development Plan which was developed with input from a group of property owners, merchants, elected officials, and City staff. The Strategic Development Plan pointed out that a four-lane street would have the following benefits:

- ! It would preserve the palm tree lined visual quality of the Avenue.
- ! It would keep University Avenue at an appropriate pedestrian scale.
- ! It would preserve more room for development and site amenities on adjacent parcels.

The Strategic Development Plan recommended that University Avenue remain four lanes with widening at major intersections to accommodate turning movements and as necessary for bike lanes. The Draft City of Riverside General Plan Circulation Element supports this concept of University Avenue as a four-lane street.

3.2.2 Lack of Pedestrian Amenities and Consistent Design Quality

The streetscape along University Avenue is characterized by uneven, poor quality development in a strip pattern, lacking variety, and quality architectural design and landscaping; the street environment is not conducive to pedestrian activities.

Many of the comments made in this area focused on the need to improve the streetscape and pedestrian environment along certain portions of University Avenue. Suggestions included installing/improving street oriented landscaping and street furniture, emphasizing pedestrian oriented uses, designing buildings and improvements at a pedestrian scale and de-emphasizing street oriented parking. The Task Force supported the concept of "activity nodes" (areas of intense pedestrian oriented uses and amenities) at key locations to energize the street, the development of a "village environment" and design standards to provide a consistent architecture and landscape image.

3.2.3 Over-Concentration of Certain Land Uses

The Task Force identified certain uses that are excessive and objectionable and, therefore, should be de-emphasized. These uses include gasoline stations, some auto service uses, drive-through restaurants, liquor stores and certain types of motels. The Task Force subcommittee agreed that problem land uses will discourage property improvement and that poor investment perpetuates itself.

3.2.4 Vacant Land

Currently many parcels along University Avenue are either vacant or contain unoccupied structures. These vacant parcels and unoccupied structures substantially contribute to the poor visual quality of the Avenue. The unoccupied structures and vacant lots often are in poor condition.

3.2.5 Poor Private Property Maintenance

Poor property maintenance was an often-expressed concern in meetings of the Citizen Task Force and its subcommittees. Maintenance of property along University Avenue affects property values and the general welfare of the corridor. Corrective measures are necessary to alleviate poorly kept conditions. The Committee emphasized that an aggressive property maintenance program and code enforcement is needed to clearly define rules and consequences.

3.2.6 Unattractive, Illegal and Non-Conforming Signs

Much of the signage along University Avenue reflects the very liberal sign ordinance that predates the current ordinance. There is a proliferation of pole signs at various heights and sizes, situated very close to one-another. While code compliance efforts have kept the numbers of illegal signs down, illegal handwritten signs, window posters and signs, readerboards and banners are still a source of visual blight.

3.2.7 Small Parcel Sizes and Overabundance of Driveway Cuts

Much of University Avenue, especially between Park and Chicago Avenues consists of small commercial structures on small lots of 50-60 feet in width. Individual driveways to each small lot interrupt the pedestrian flow along the sidewalk, resulting in little room for landscaping, and causing unsafe traffic conditions. The consolidation of curb cuts and lots would provide opportunities for improving the overall visual, pedestrian, and economic character of the area.

3.2.8 Incentives Rather than Restrictions

While land use regulations, development standards and code enforcement will be essential to the improvement of University Avenue, consensus appears to exist over the important role that incentives can play. The incentives are seen as both supportive programs, including but not limited to economic incentives, to help property owners beautify and improve their properties, as well as incentives built into the development standards to encourage conversion of non-conforming land uses to new uses which reflect the longer-term vision for the corridor.

As noted above under incentives, the need for broad-based development standards should not simply be viewed as new land use regulations cut from traditional cloth. In this sense, land use regulations should both "limit" as well as "encourage". To rely upon traditional change, whereby uses develop in accordance with new standards, would be woefully inadequate in reversing the perception of decline. Instead, clearly articulated expectations, backed with suitable enforcement and incentives are vital to bringing about a rapid change in conditions.

3.2.9 Investment Throughout the Corridor

University Avenue is a vital link between Downtown and UCR--a street of City-wide importance. Nevertheless, University Avenue varies in character due to many factors: physical conditions, parcel sizes, existing and surrounding land uses, and so forth. These varied conditions must be recognized and dealt with in the final development standards so that all parts of University Avenue are given proper attention. For example, investment should be encouraged along all segments of the street, including the area between Park and Chicago Avenues where investment has been chronically absent.

3.2.10 Future Planning

Efforts at reversing declining conditions along University Avenue cannot stop with aggressive development standards. Strong support from the Eastside Neighborhood Advisory Committee (ENAC) exists for the need to follow the Specific Plan with an update to the Eastside and University Community plans. Without addressing conditions in surrounding community areas, the application of new standards to University Avenue alone will be inadequate.

3.2.11 Crime and Social Problems

The Task Force indicated that crime and social problems have increased in the area and that these issues should be addressed in the Specific Plan, where possible. The fundamental precept underlying the Specific Plan is that positive change in the character of University Avenue can only be brought about through the joint efforts of community residents, business and property owners, and local government working together. That cooperation is aided by a vision for the future established through the planning process and development standards which provide clear guidance to all parties concerned with University Avenue. The development standards within this Specific Plan primarily have a physical focus. While there is an intangible relationship between the physical appearance and the design of the area and its social character, the primary focus of the Specific Plan is on improving the physical environment. In addition to the Specific Plan, other programs and activities must be undertaken to appropriately address the security and social problems in the area.